

Local Church Standing in the United Church of Christ for new or affiliating Faith Communities

Local Church Standing Discernment Process

A new church start, ministry setting, or existing congregation that desires to be a Local Church of the United Church of Christ seeks to do so through the Local Church Standing Discernment process within an Association or a Conference Acting as an Association, as every Local Church in the United Church of Christ holds standing in an Association or a Conference Acting As an Association.¹ The Local Church Standing Discernment process engages all discernment partners in reflection, conversation, and assessment, so that the readiness of a particular faith community for relationship, affiliation, support, and accountability alongside other Local Churches in the UCC can be discerned.

The partners referenced in the Local Church Standing Discernment Process include:

- The gathered body of the Local Church in Discernment, as represented by elected lay leadership,
- The ministerial leader/staff of the church,
- The Association where the Local Church in Discernment is gathered (or a designated body within the Association described in its bylaws, such as a Committee on Ministry),
- The Conference Minister or designated staff representative.

The process unfolds in the following sequence:

1. Exploration and discernment within the faith community
2. Initial meeting of the faith community and the Association or designated body
3. Development of a Preparation and Formation Plan
4. Foundational documents created, reviewed, and/or revised
5. Ongoing discernment, preparation and formation, and development of the Local Church Profile
6. Periodic discernment reviews, making adjustments to the preparation and formation plan as necessary
7. Successful completion of Association expectations as affirmed by a Final Review
8. Standing conferred by the vote of the Association at a called Association meeting and covenants affirmed
9. Liturgical Celebrations at Conference Annual Meeting and General Synod

¹ According to the UCC Constitution, “An Association is that body within a Conference of the United Church of Christ which is composed of all Local Churches in a geographical area” as well as the authorized ministers with standing in the Association.

Exploration and discernment for a minister.

Ministers of faith communities should explore the process for Ministerial Authorization and Standing in the United Church of Christ at the same time their faith community is engaged in discernment. A faith community's eligibility to obtain Local Church Standing is dependent upon their minister having authorized standing within the United Church of Christ. The exploration and discernment processes for ministers are described in the 2018 Manual on Ministry.

1 Implementing Local Church Standing Discernment process and conferring Local Church
 2 Standing are responsibilities entrusted to an Association. Often, Associations designate in their
 3 bylaws a specific subgroup to do this work on their behalf (such as a Committee on Ministry),
 4 but the final conferring of Local Church Standing should occur by a vote of Association
 5 delegates at a called Association meeting. It is understood and expected that the work of the
 6 Association will be done in collaboration and consultation with the Conference Minister and
 7 Conference staff.

8
 9 The Association will utilize the definition of a Local Church in the United Church of Christ as
 10 well as the Marks of Faithful and Vital Local Churches and the Congregational Code for Local
 11 Churches as foundational documents in its discernment with faith communities. The
 12 Congregational Code is considered a foundational commitment for Local Churches of the United
 13 Church of Christ. The Marks of Faithful and Vital Local Churches is an aspirational document
 14 intended for continual growth and formation.

15
 16 Based on discernment between the partners involved at each step of the process, decisions by the
 17 Association must ultimately be a *Yes* or a *No* but may include the intermediate decision of *No*,
 18 *but*.

- 19 • A *Yes* decision indicates unhesitant affirmation and continuation of next steps.
- 20 • A *No, but...* decision terminates the process but expresses potential for a new start to the
 21 discernment process at a future date and offers recommendations for the needed growth
 22 or change.
- 23 • A *No...* decision indicates a termination of the process, recognizing that a faith
 24 community may be called to a form of ministry, but not as a Local Church of the United
 25 Church of Christ.

26
 27 Throughout this process, a faith community is referred to as such, until it has been engaged in
 28 formal conversation with the Association and approved to become a **Local Church in**
 29 **Discernment**. A Local Church in Discernment does not yet have standing or status in the UCC.
 30 Upon completion of the process, they become a **Local Church with Standing in the United**
 31 **Church of Christ**.

32
 33 The process towards Local Church Standing is not to be rushed. Especially in the case of new
 34 church plants, it may take several years to ensure that the faith community is ready to affiliate,
 35 has appropriate and sustainable leadership, and has developed a clear pathway forward for
 36 financial viability outside of direct support from Conference or National sources.

37

- 1 Where a faith community has prior or ongoing affiliations with other denominations, it is the
2 responsibility of the Conference Staff to communicate appropriately with ecumenical regional
3 judicatory leaders once Local Church Standing Discernment has begun.
4
5 Conference or Association Administrators are expected to keep current records of the initiation
6 and termination of Congregational Standing processes and schedules and to share this
7 information with the National Setting of the United Church of Christ.
8

Note for Association and Conference Staff:

The National Setting categorizes Local Churches in record keeping through the Data Hub as follows:

Schedule 0 – A UCC Church

Schedule 1 – Did not vote/abstained from voting on becoming a part of the UCC

Schedule 2 – Churches that voted NOT to be a part of the UCC (used for the Congregational/Christian Churches who abstained from voting)

Schedule 3 – Removed Churches (closed, withdrawn, et cetera)

Schedule 4 – New Church Starts/ Proposed Congregations, referred to in this document as “Local Church In Discernment”

1 Step-by-step Congregational Standing Process

2

3

1. Exploration and Discernment within the Faith Community

4

5 For those exploring a sense of call to be a Local Church within the United Church of Christ, the
6 first place to engage that call and listen for feedback is within the faith community. This early
7 discernment within a faith community centers on its mission, vision, purpose, and identity, and
8 puts those commitments in conversation with what it means to be a Local Church in the United
9 Church of Christ. Leaders of the faith community are encouraged to be in contact with the staff
10 and/or representatives of the Conference and Association in which they are geographically
11 located for support and resources as they engage in this internal discernment.

12

13 A faith community's discernment should consider the following documents:

14

15

16

17

18

19

- the United Church of Christ Statement of Faith
- the Marks of Faithful and Vital Local Churches
- the Congregational Code for Local Churches
- the United Church of Christ Constitution and Bylaws
- the United Church of Christ Manual on Ministry (2018)

20

21

22

23 If a faith community is considering affiliation with the United Church of Christ as well as
24 another denomination, there are special considerations of decision making outlined in the
25 Multiply Affiliated Congregations Section which follows later in this section.

26

27

28

29

30

31

32

33

34

35 Following a time of discernment, a faith community's leadership or governing body makes a *Yes*
36 or *No* decision to request a meeting with the Association for its consideration to formally enter
37 Local Church Standing Discernment process.

38

39

40

41

42

43

44

45

- *Yes* decision. If the decision is *Yes*, the leadership team or governing body of a faith
community writes a brief letter of intent to the Association, stating the request to begin
Local Church Standing Discernment process. The letter should include the contact
information of elected (or potential) elected Lay Leadership, and Ministerial leadership,
church mailing address, and any other key contact information to help facilitate a
conversation. Additional documentation may be required by the Association alongside
the letter of intent, or it may be required in the course of the discernment conversation.
Examples of additional documentation include:
 - statement of the faith community's historical and spiritual journey
 - reflection on the faith community's understanding of their call to be in covenant
with the United Church of Christ
 - the faith community's mission, vision, purpose, and values
 - description of the faith community's life of faith
 - description of how the community of faith is organized, including documentation
of institutional formation (constitution, bylaws, etc.)
 - reflection on the resonance of the United Church of Christ's statement of Faith
with the faith community
 - other requirements as established by an Association for all of its applicants to the
Congregational Standing process.

- 1 • *No decision*: If, after prayerful discernment the faith community's leadership team or
2 governing body does not want to become a Local Church in covenant with the United
3 Church of Christ, the process of discernment towards Local Church Standing ends here.
4

5 If the Association and/or Conference have been providing support in the discernment
6 process, the *No decision* should be communicated to the appropriate party at this point.
7

8 Associations are encouraged to have consistent, written policies that specify requirements for
9 their context so that expectations for faith communities entering discernment are clear.

10 Additionally, Associations are encouraged to allow faith communities to submit not only written
11 documentation but also video or media so that a faith community may fully, authentically, and
12 openly express their stories, commitments, and reflections.
13

14 2. Initial Meeting with the Association 15

16 Upon receipt of the letter of intent from the faith community, an Association schedules an initial
17 meeting with the faith community partners. Any representatives from the faith community that
18 have been a part of the discernment process are encouraged to attend and contribute to the
19 meeting. Additional documentation may be required by the Association before an initial meeting.
20

21 Such documentation may include:

- 22 • statement of the faith community's historical and spiritual journey
- 23 • reflection on the faith community's understanding of their call to be in covenant
24 with the United Church of Christ
- 25 • the faith community's mission, vision, purpose, and values
- 26 • description of the faith community's life of faith
- 27 • description of how the community of faith is organized, including documentation
28 of institutional formation (constitution, bylaws, etc.)
- 29 • reflection on the resonance of the United Church of Christ's statement of Faith
30 with the faith community
- 31 • other requirements as established by an Association for all of its applicants to the
32 Congregational Standing process.
33

34 As appropriate, a cultural consultant may be invited to this and future meetings with the faith
35 community. A cultural consultant is particularly recommended to help observe clear differences
36 in cultural norms when those cultural norms are not already a majority in the Association's
37 leadership. Conference staff can recommend trained cultural consultants or other conversation
38 partners.
39

40 The purpose of this initial meeting is to:

- 41 • offer hospitality to the faith community,
- 42 • listen prayerfully to the movement of the Spirit,
- 43 • engage in conversation about the faith community's spiritual journey and call,
- 44 • outline expectations of the process,
- 45 • and clarify any questions from the faith community and/or the Association.
46

1 Following the meeting, the Association votes whether to accept the faith community into the
 2 Local Church Standing Discernment process for further exploration of a potential covenant with
 3 the UCC. The Association communicates this decision in a timely manner to the faith
 4 community.

- 5 • *Yes* decision. If the Association's decision is *Yes* to receive the Local Church as a
 6 Church in Discernment at this point, the Association shall communicate to the
 7 Conference that there is a Local Church in Discernment, and the Conference shall
 8 notify the National Setting.
- 9 • *No, but...* decision. If the Association's decision is *No, but...*, then, the Association
 10 articulates the conditions necessary for the faith community to meet before
 11 reconsidering their application.
- 12 • *No* decision. If the Association's decision is *No*, the discernment process towards
 13 Local Church Standing ends here.

14
 15 The Association assigns an Authorized Minister with United Church of Christ Ministerial
 16 Standing in the Association as a Local Church Discernment Advisor. The Advisor serves as a
 17 liaison between the Association and the faith community's leadership team to help the faith
 18 community prepare for the next steps of the Local Church Standing Discernment process and to
 19 assist in networking them to the appropriate resources in the Association, Conference, and
 20 National Setting of United Church of Christ. The Advisor is present to accompany, support, and
 21 answer questions about United Church of Christ culture and polity.

22 23 3. Development of a Preparation and Formation Plan

24
 25 A preparation and formation plan is developed for the Local Church in Discernment by the
 26 Association, based on the Marks of Faithful and Vital Local Churches and in relation to the
 27 Association's assessment of the faith community's letter of request and any requested
 28 supplemental materials. While the Association should standardize any requirements of the Local
 29 Church Standing Discernment process (including the review of foundational documents and the
 30 completion of a Local Church Profile), preparation and formation plans are individualized to
 31 each discerning faith community. These plans may take multiple paths based on the nature of the
 32 faith community, available options for supporting a faith community in their development, and
 33 needs of the United Church of Christ.

34
 35 Elements of preparation and formation plans may include some or all of the following:

- 36 • completion of a study in United Church of Christ History, Polity and Theology as a faith
 37 community
- 38 • demonstration of specified outcomes in the Marks of Faithful and Vital Local Churches;
- 39 • implementation of practices described by the Congregational Code for Local Churches;
- 40 • engagement with the wider Church, such as participation in Association annual meetings,
 41 Conference committees, General Synod, etc.;

42
 43 With the establishment of a preparation and formation plan, the faith community continues its
 44 work of discernment and formation internally. The pace and progression are set by the faith
 45 community and supported by the Local Church Standing Advisor.

4. Foundational Documents Created, Reviewed, and/or Revised

A Local Church in Discernment may need support in creating, reviewing, or revising their foundational documents before consideration for Local Church Standing. Laws vary by state, so consulting a lawyer who is familiar with state laws applicable to churches is highly recommended to advise a prospective Local Church of what needs to be included in these documents. All are encouraged to consult the (*forthcoming*) Governance section of the Manual on Church for further clarity on areas of special attention with regard to United Church of Christ polity and best practices.

A Local Church in Discernment will benefit from reviewing any existing constitution and bylaws, governance structures, and formal documentation of legal recognition, revising as needed to reflect United Church of Christ polity and developing identity. The Local Church in Discernment should also review their policies (such as employment policies, financial practices, etc.) and edit as needed to reflect best practices, community values, and faithful intentionality in community.

If a Local Church in Discernment is considering multiply affiliating with the United Church of Christ alongside another denomination(s), they will benefit from an intentional time to examine their constitution and bylaws, governance structures, and formal documentation regarding legal recognition, to determine what areas of revision are appropriate or necessary to reflect multiple affiliations. Consultation with the Conference Minister as well as the judicatory minister from the other denomination(s) are vital during this step so that the bylaws speak to areas of community life where polities of multiple denominations may conflict. See the (*forthcoming*) Multiply Affiliated Congregations Section for more information.

A Local Church in Discernment is encouraged to share their foundational documents with the Association and Conference Minister for feedback and conversation.

5. Ongoing Preparation and Formation and Development of the Local Church Profile;

Following the discernment work on its foundational documents, a Local Church in Discernment begins to build a Local Church Profile. Training and consultation are available from the Association and/or Conference staff. The faith community focuses on the three sections of the Local Church Profile:

- Who we are now,
- Who is Our Neighbor,
- Who is God calling us to become.

Responding to these three sections is a task intended to help introduce a Local Church in Discernment to denominational tools used for Search and Call, as well as to serve as a platform for the Local Church in Discernment to articulate their sense of call, identity, and theological foundation to the Association.

Though vital at the time a church is engaged with searching for a new pastor, it is recommended that these three sections of the Local Church Profile are revisited and updated by a Local Church

1 every 3-5 years, regardless of whether a church engages in search and call, as an act of
2 encouraging ongoing discernment within the Local Church.

3 4 6. Periodic Discernment Reviews

5
6 Local Churches in Discernment meet periodically with their Association (or the designated body
7 within the Association, such as a Committee on Ministry), to listen together to God's call for
8 their respective ministries and shared relationship, to review progress of the preparation and
9 formation plan, to adjust the plan if needed, and to determine next steps in the discernment
10 process. A Periodic Discernment Review is recommended every 6 months but should occur at
11 least annually. A Periodic Discernment Review is an opportunity for both discernment and
12 assessment. Partners in the discernment process—such as representatives from the faith
13 community, Local Church Standing Advisors, and others— may be encouraged to contribute to
14 this review.

15
16 Following the periodic review, the Association (or a designated body within the Association,
17 such as a Committee on Ministry), prayerfully makes one of the following decisions:

- 18 • *Yes.* The Association affirms the faith community's continuation as a Local Church in
19 Discernment.
- 20 • *No, but.* The Association terminates the faith community's continuation as a Local
21 Church in Discernment due to lack of progress and/or substantial need for growth, with
22 constructive feedback offered to support the community of faith.
- 23 • *No.* The Association determines that the faith community is not called to or suited for
24 ministry as a Local Church in covenant with the United Church of Christ. The Local
25 Church in Discernment process ends here.

26
27 All decisions that result from the periodic review should be communicated in writing and added
28 to the faith community's Association and/or Conference file. If the Local Church Standing
29 Discernment process is terminated, the results are to be reported to the Conference, and the
30 Conference will communicate that with the National Setting.

31 32 7. Final Review

33
34 Once the Association assesses that Local Church in Discernment has completed their preparation
35 and formation plan, the faith community's foundational documents are in order, and the practices
36 of the faith community have been demonstrated as consistent with the expectations of a Local
37 Church in the United Church of Christ, the faith community submits a copy of their foundational
38 documents and Local Church Profile in preparation for a Final Review.

39
40 In an atmosphere of prayer and openness to the Holy Spirit, the Association holds the Final
41 Review and discusses with Local Church in Discernment their sense of call and journey of
42 preparation, reflecting together on the Local Church Profile alongside the Marks.
43 Following the Final Review, the Association decides if it is time to move from discernment to
44 recommendation of Local Church Standing.

45
46 Options for this decision are:

- 1 • *Yes.* The Association recommends the faith community be granted Local Church
2 Standing in the United Church of Christ. This recommendation is communicated to
3 members and Local Churches of the Association, along with the scheduled date for the
4 meeting of the Association to vote on Local Church Standing.
- 5 • *No.* The Association does not recommend the faith community be granted Local Church
6 Standing in the United Church of Christ and concludes that its process of discernment is
7 complete with this decision. Local Church Standing Discernment is terminated.
8

9 All decisions are communicated to the Local Church in Discernment and to the Conference in
10 writing. The Conference communicates this decision to the National Setting.
11

12 8. Association Vote on Local Church Standing 13

14 Local Church Standing must be conferred by the Association by vote at a regular meeting or a
15 special meeting called for that purpose. At the time a meeting is set, the Local Church Profile is
16 shared with Association meeting delegates. That will serve as the basis for conversation and
17 discernment prior to a vote to confer Local Church Standing.
18

19 Following the vote, the Association communicates its decision with the Conference. The
20 Conference informs the National Setting.
21

22 When an Association's vote is affirmative, celebration is encouraged! The Association may
23 consider liturgies of welcome for the new Local Church and appropriate gifts of welcome for the
24 context.
25

26 When an Association's vote is not to grant standing, the Association has a duty to prayerfully
27 communicate this decision to the faith community, along with any reasons behind this decision.
28 Local Church Discernment Standing is terminated at this time; an Association can communicate
29 what needs to be accomplished by the faith community in order to reapply in the future.
30

31 9. Liturgical Celebrations at Conference Annual Meeting and General Synod 32

33 Following the affirmative vote of an Association to receive a new Local Church and the
34 celebration within the Association, it is important for other settings of the church to offer its
35 congratulations and best wishes for the Local Church. At the Conference annual meeting
36 following the reception of a new Local Church within an Association, a liturgy and celebration
37 of welcome should take place. Likewise, the Conference should communicate with the national
38 setting for the new Local Church to be included in a celebration as the next General Synod of the
39 United Church of Christ.
40
41
42